

The Peak of Professionalism

An inside look at KACP’s new telecommunications accreditation program

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“I know how much dispatchers care about what they do, and it’s nice to have an outsider look at what they’re doing and validate the hard work they put in,” said Bowling Green Communication Center Manager Malissa Carter.

Carter led the Bowling Green Communication Center to its first telecommunications accreditation acquisition, setting

them up as one of the first two communications centers in the state to receive the new Kentucky Association of Chiefs of Police Telecommunications Accreditation certificate.

In December, KACP launched its telecommunications accreditation program with 12 pilot agencies, expecting the process to take about 12 to 18 months for most agencies to complete. However, Bowling Green and Muhlenburg County 911 achieved the feat in about four months, and were awarded their official certificates in late April.

“It was nice to pull the policy or procedure for each standard and see that we complied,” Carter said about the process of preparing for accreditation. “We made some adjustments, but for the most part we (already) handled things the way they wanted in the standard.”

Being a frontrunner in the accreditation process is not new for Bowling Green. The police department was one of the first agencies in Kentucky to achieve accreditation through KACP more than 20 years ago, and received its fifth five-year accreditation certificate in July 2013.

“I’ve always been proud of the status of being one of the first police departments to be accredited,” said Bowling Green Police Chief Doug Hawkins, “and I selfishly wanted the achievement of being the first

communication center accredited. It is meaningful to me to have the same standard with our communications center. It’s a testament of our professionalism in our community and the quality of our agency.

“As importantly locally, is how accreditation translates into quality of service,” Hawkins continued. “Accreditation inspires confidence and is a meaningful measure of performance, and when put into play, it translates to high-quality service to our community.”

Part of what made the journey to accreditation quick and efficient for the Bowling Green Communication Center was the police department’s prior accreditation, Carter said. There is a section of standards housed inside law enforcement agency accreditation standards that specifically relates to the telecommunication center. Having met and complied with these standards for more than two decades, Carter already knew that her center and staff were operating on a highly effective level, she said.

“It was different because as part of the police department there were standards already in place like record keeping, the evaluation process and other areas where we already had policies in place,” Carter said. “Maj. Michael Delaney pulled all of those together, and then the more call-center specific standards such as the dispatching >>



▲ Bowling Green Police Communication Center Director Malissa Carter sought out accreditation to provide confirmation that her dispatch center was providing top-notch service.

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▲ Muhlenburg County 911 Director Kristi Jenkins has led the 911 center since 2003. Her hard work and determination allowed her agency to become one of the first two accredited dispatch centers in Kentucky.

PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

>> process and emergency situations, I assisted him in getting those policies and procedures together.”

But even though they had a good head start on policies and procedures, preparing for the on-site visit still was taxing, Carter said.

“We were confident, but it was nerve wracking because you know you have the right answers, but you might not always be able to come up with them on the spot,” she said. “But after it was over, we realized it wasn’t so bad. Our dispatchers are well trained and they knew the answers off the top of their head.

“The nice thing about accreditation is they don’t ask for concepts that are far out or based on theory,” Carter continued. “They wanted to know your daily practices, performance practices — not how you operate in a vacuum, but how your operations should work every day.”

As an independent public-safety answering point, or PSAP, the Muhlenburg County 911 center did not have the benefit of falling under an agency that had already achieved accreditation. And unlike the BGPD Communications Center,

Muhlenburg County 911 dispatches for multiple law enforcement agencies in the county, as well as fire, EMS, the Humane Society, constables and county utilities.

“As a stand-alone PSAP you have to come up with all of it on your own,” said Muhlenburg County 911 Director Kristi Jenkins. “There were things I felt like we had covered and were doing well. But once I saw the standards, I realized we weren’t fully covered. It was good to see and realize what I needed in my center.

“Though the process mainly fell on me to implement, it also fell on the dispatchers because it is their responsibility to know our procedures,” Jenkins continued. “They took it that we are here to serve the responders and citizens. That’s a big responsibility — their lives are in our hands. We want to do anything we can do to better ourselves, so we took it and ran with it.”

Jenkins, who has served as the PSAP director since 2003, consistently has strived to run the most efficient and effective communications center possible, she said. When the accreditation program was launched in December 2014, she had just begun a policy and procedure update.

“One reason we were able to accomplish accreditation so quickly was the training requirements,” Jenkins said. “It was broken down to trainers, supervisors, directors, managers, and we already had all of that taken care of. And the quality assurance — we do evaluations and we record them, and they’re filed. We stay on top of that because you can’t correct something if you’re not finding it. We are constantly doing quality assurance.”

For Jenkins, she found that she was already running a top-notch center, but she still had room to learn and grow in certain policy areas.

“It’s just about serving for me,” Jenkins said. “Even at our quarterly staff meetings, I’m always analyzing about how we can improve. We do an excellent job and I will praise [my staff] for that. But we start each meeting with what can be improved and end with what they will do.

“When they think they know it all and can’t learn anything else, it’s time for them to leave,” Jenkins continued. “This is not a job where you will ever know everything and not have room to improve.”

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When KACP Accreditation Manager Shawn Butler prepared to roll out the telecommunications accreditation program, he knew it was important that, like Jenkins and Carter, the communications centers across the state take ownership over the program.

“They do this on a day-to-day basis.” Butler said. “I didn’t want their community to think the police were developing their program. It was developed by them.”

He secured the input and direction of telecommunications instructors at the Department of Criminal Justice Training who have not only served in communications centers in their careers, but also have taught best practices and trained hundreds of telecommunications personnel in the basic academy and numerous in-service and leadership courses.

The program consists of 60 standards, broken down into 12 chapters that touch on every major facet of operating a professional communications center in Kentucky. To kick off the program, Butler traveled to various locations in Kentucky to talk in depth about the standards and the program expectations.

“We took all 60 standards and went over them one by one,” Butler recalled. “It wasn’t the sexiest, flashiest thing, but we’ve done that with the law enforcement accreditation for a while, and it works

because it lays it out and [they] understand what we want, what we’re looking for and the rationale behind the standards.”

Butler sees the telecommunications program eventually taking on similar qualities of the law enforcement program, in networking and idea and policy sharing among agencies, he said. Ultimately, the accreditation program will encourage professional growth and accountability statewide, which in turn makes all first-responder services better.

The program is set up on a four-year reaccreditation timeline, to ensure that the rapidly changing technology in the field is kept up to date with necessary policy and procedures to cover them, Butler said.

“Shawn Butler said it wasn’t easy to get accredited, but it is even harder to maintain it,” Jenkins recalled. “But I have no doubt that we’ll get it again in four years. He said people will get the policies and procedures and won’t stick to them. Our goal is to stick with them.

“I think anything you can do to improve your agency, to have better standards for your agency and to better serve the public and responders, you are obligated to do,” Jenkins added. “We are a service, and we should do it to the best of our abilities.”

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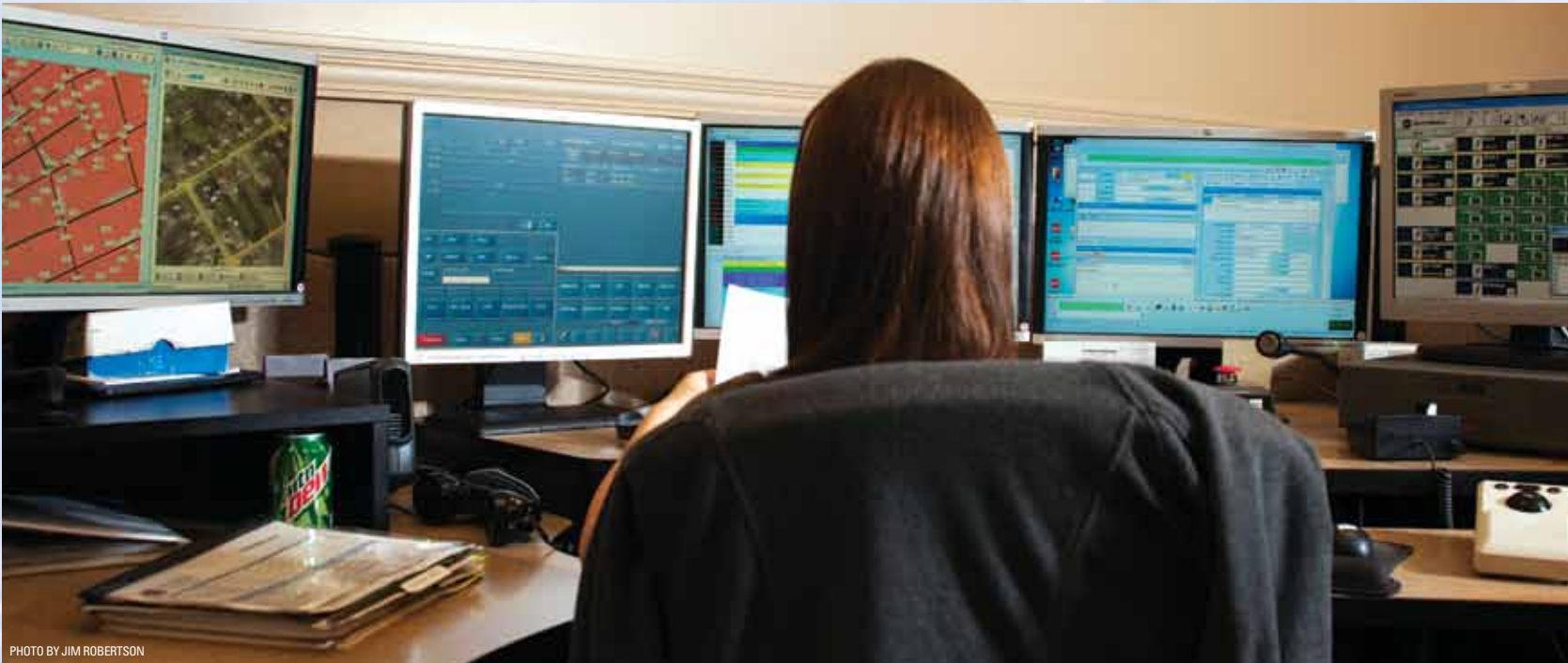


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John Carey dispatches calls for the Madison County 911 Center in Richmond.

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